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Representation of Symbols and Signage of Ancient Iranian Festivals in Contemporary Posters

Samane Khanjani^a, Maryam Lari^{b*}^a*Department of Art and Architecture, Yazd Branch, Islamic Azad University, Yazd, Iran*^b*Faculty member of Research Arts, Islamic Azad University, Islamshahr Branch, Islamic Azad University, Tehran, Iran*

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Abstract

Many ancient ceremonies and rituals of Iran, in addition to their ritualistic and humanitarian characteristics, have a role in social and economic affairs and have remained stable within the economic, social and cultural structure of the society. Since graphics is an art related to the community, the artists' awareness of various cultural backgrounds and familiarity with the identity of the society and its proper use is inevitable. The present research studies the presence of some of the most important symbols of Iranian festivals in posters. Using a descriptive-analytic method, the following two questions are answered; what are the visual expression techniques implemented in designing posters related to Iranian festivals? and how have Iranian festivals become figurative in contemporary posters? In response to the questions, it has been tried to identify the way to reflect Iranian festivals in posters, and therefore the appearance of these symbols has been assessed. The aim of this study is to peruse the techniques that have been used by the designer to portray them. The present study has analyzed 15 contemporary posters and has examined five important posters related to ancient Iranian festivals and found that the designer has directly used symbols related to each festival in most of the artworks studied. In the analysis of the artworks related to the celebrations, most of the general structures of the artwork were of an original and combined form in detail. In these posters, artists have tried to communicate with the audience using techniques such as typography and printing, and visual elements such as rhythm, texture, color, form, and symbols. This function has strong and weak points in expressing concepts. This research has been able to determine these points through the structure analysis of the posters.

Keywords: Iranian Festival; Symbolism; Iranian Graphic Design; Poster Design; Visual Expression

* Corresponding author. Tel: +98-9359916882.

E-mail address: lari_maryam@yahoo.com.

1. Introduction

Festival is a cultural feature of any community. Celebration and enjoyment have existed since ancient times. How to conduct these festivals has been an ancient tradition in the ancient Iranian culture, and literature and illustrations are suitable sources to study these festivals. In ancient Iran, celebration and happiness formed the basis of people's life, and structured their religious beliefs and emphasis on ritual teachings. Identity in any culture has to be addressed, and hence the most important approach to success is using cultural treasures through the art tools.

Considering the title of the article in the practical section of this research, an attempt is made to first introduce the most important celebrations and their elements and then to study how to implement these symbols in the selected posters of the recent years. With knowledge of the techniques that have been used to create the work of art, graphic designers analyzed the type of composition and use of various visual elements such as color, rhythm, surface, etc. Understanding how Iranian festivals are reflected in the contemporary posters of Iran, studying the symbols reflected in the posters and scrutinizing the techniques that designers have used for illustration are the main goals of this research. This can be used as a guide to recognize and analyze the artwork, help perceiving the cultural signs in Iranian history, and influence its representation in contemporary, and especially, graphic art.

What is important in this research is the way designers interact with the elements, the composition of different visual elements, and the use of various graphical techniques to present themes such as movement, vitality and expression of different emotions to identify the most important aspects involved in the formation of an effect to convey the concept.

1.1. Literature Review

The research tries to focus on descriptive analyses of festivals and rituals, distinguish the symbols associated with each ritual, examine them as signs in graphic arts and in specific forms in contemporary posters, and comparatively analyze the semantic roots in artwork. In several studies, such as student dissertations, the analysis and description of symbols, their role in graphic art and how they are applied in posters are discussed. However, this study has tried to give an overview of the functional and practical designs of posters, the application of each symbol, the influence of the rituals in this art, and the return of the Iranian cultural identity.

Sharifian (2006), in his master's thesis entitled, "*Ideology, symbolism and meaning in graphic art*", has focused on the structural features in image composition with the content of Iranian celebrations and rituals and has examined the visual structures and visual elements in the presentation of the ceremonies and rituals. He focuses on visual elements such as color, rhythm and movement in his artwork and analyzes the role of rituals and celebrations in the final formation of the work based on the principles of art. Leila Badrazimi (2014), in her thesis, "*Analysis of the visual structure of Iranian artwork with the theme of ceremonies*", has analyzed the visual structure and visual elements in the presentation of celebrations and rituals in the work of illustrators of the last two decades. The main aim was to find the subject that interested Iranian illustrators and their reaction to Iranian traditional rituals.

1.2. Research Method

The research has a descriptive-analytical method along with data (i.e. images) interpretation and their adaptation. The information is collected through library study, and the data collection tools

include documentary resources, selected images from books and internet resources. Therefore, based on the study of the images and posters collected and designed by the authors, the image samples are compared with the concepts and symbols obtained from ancient Iranian festivals.

2. Ancient Festival

Festivals in Iran are referred to as '*Eid*'. They are common among the Zoroastrians, for whom before every ceremony there is a ritual and the prayer anthem from the Avesta, asking for forgiveness for the deceased. This was known as a celebration and gradually took place on the feast day. The number of Iranian festivals is estimated to be more than 73 annually. This shows that people of Iran celebrated either the day before or the day after the festival. For ancient human beings, enjoyment has its own special place. In the inscriptions, documents and ancient texts, one can find the oldest references of the inhabitants of the Iranian plateau of the special customs of festivals. In the Achaemenid inscriptions, Ahuramazda is the Great God who has created joy for mankind. It is said that even at the time of death, people and relatives must not grieve. Therefore, the philosophy of happiness in ancient Iran is rich in content (Akhte, 2009: 15).

To achieve the purpose of conquering the devilish forces, Iranian needed two things, one is strong body and arms while the other is strong intention, firm soul and faith to defeat the filthy fortune. In order to reach the second part, that is a healthy soul, they required several devices, one of which was to organize multiple seasonal festivals throughout the year on different occasions. People participated in these celebrations, and healthy recreation, squeaky pleasures, fireworks and tap-dance gave them mental happiness, released them from mental fatigue and physical tiredness of the body and prepared them for the next day's hard work after the celebration. The Nowruz festival is among the many ancient Iranian festivals celebrated in detail. There are special days in the history of the ancient and civilized Iran which reminds us of the important stories and events.

In ancient times, any type of personal, social, intellectual and physical activities was considered as a religious activity. In fact, what we call culture today was known as religion in the olden days. This religion, both primary and advanced, included a series of beliefs and holy narratives that had multiple individual and social rituals, and the life cycle was based on these beliefs and traditions. The most common rituals used were birth, puberty, marriage, death, planting and harvesting (Bahareh, 2014: 163).

In ancient Iran, every day and month has been called as a Goddess. Thus, when each day of the month matched with the name of that month, the Iranians celebrated that day and since there were twelve months in a year, it resulted in twelve celebrations (see Table 6).

2.1. Iranian Festivals and Symbols

Among the festivals that have been performed in ancient times, a handful of them are known today among the people, with their traditions being implemented. The important festivals are Nowruz, Mehregan (first month of autumn), Yalda (celebrated as the longest and darkest night of the year), Sadeh (celebrates 50 days before Nowruz, that is 29th January) and Chaharshanbe Soori (celebrated on the eve of the last Wednesday before Nowruz); there are special symbols for the recognition of each festival (Table 6).

2.2. Iranian Festivals and Symbols in Contemporary Posters

Since 1960s, serious transformations have taken place in poster art by talented graphic designers. Participation in social activities and advertisement of cultural and artistic works of art are for

communication and information exchange. The poster artist utilizes the achievements of contemporary graphic art, different modern trends and traditional roles in various types of common methods. In 1979, due to the significant political events, posters were considered by various groups and hence found it true place. The first exhibition of political posters was held at the faculty of fine arts in 1979, which was welcomed and appreciated by people. The political trend was the revolutionary initiators in the field of graphics particularly in the design of posters. In recent years, people and artists have given attention to the Iranian civilization and culture. Therefore, a lot of work has been done by artists using cultural symbols in the field of cultural affairs.

The study intends to explain the posters designed with the themes of Iranian festivals and also the elements and techniques that have been used to illustrate the meaning and concept of the festival. Before examining this, one needs to look at the visual elements and features that can be effective in influencing the design.

The designer creates the image using color, form, line, texture and other visual elements. The important point is the manner in which the designer uses these elements and obtaining visual features in the poster space; each can produce important psychological effects on the audience. The designer, in order to convey the work of art, should motivate the feelings of the audience and attract their attention. To achieve this goal, the designer's artwork must have qualities related to the subject under discussion in order to interact with the artwork. The correct alignment of the visual elements leads to balance, harmony, movement, contrast, etc.; spaces that each provides a special effect on the viewers.

2.3. Visual Elements

Frame: It is the line that separates the interior space from the exterior (Hosseini Rad, 2006: 77).

Proportion: It is the mathematical concept that in visual art refers to the quality of suitable relationship between the components of artwork with each other and with the whole of the artwork (Ibid).

Balance: Creating a balance in visual art depends on how to create coordination between the elements and its components.

Harmony: Whenever in visual art, the energy interaction of the components with each other and with the whole artwork is in balance then that artwork is in harmony (Ibid).

Contrast: Contrast means inconsistency and mutual conflict between elements and visual qualities (Ibid).

Rhythm: In visual art, rhythm has a visual meaning consisting of repetition, change and movement of visual element in visual space. In other words, the systematic and continuous repetition of a pictorial element creates a visual beat (Ibid).

Equal repetition: In this type of beat, an image is repeated evenly and consistently. This rhythm creates a self-referential movement and attracts the audience. But it has a negative effect too because it lacks diversity and after a while becomes boring (Ibid).

Alternative repetition: In this beat, a visual element is repeated, but its repetition varies with the changing variations so that each audience is always waiting for a type of repetition (Ibid).

Evolutionary repetition: In this type of beats, an image or visual element starts from a special state and gradually changes into a new state as it follows the route along its growth and changes like the moon (Ibid).

Wave repetition: This type of beat is based on the alternative movement of curved surfaces and lines and is a perfect example of visual beats like the desert sand (Ibid).

3. Analysis of the Nowruz Posters

Nowruz has been the largest and most celebrated Persian festivals, which is still common today. There are many symbols from this ancient ceremony, and all people are familiar with this festival. Therefore, it is one of the most popular styles among the designers. Most of the remaining elements of Nowruz are used for other cultural events. Color is one of the important elements for the designer to achieve the goal. The designers with a proper use of color technique convey their messages to the audience, in addition to beautifying their artworks. In the posters, the designer uses live and pure colors to create a joyful and lively atmosphere. However, in posters related to Nowruz, we see green more than any other color. The green color reminds one of the start of spring and growth of plants as well as the seven elements of Haft Sin table (seven essential symbols of Nowruz on the table). The color appearance on the poster is in a way that the audience gets excited when they see it, and before reading the text on the poster the message of joy is conveyed somehow to the audience. The reason why the designer uses the green color is that green indicates greenery and spring, but it is not easy to portray elements such as vinegar, Samanu (a sweet pudding made of wheat), and Sepand (Syrian rue), and thus conveying messages via green color does not work quickly at times.

Another commonly used color is red, usually for the illustration of apples and goldfish. The goldfish is not a part of the Haft Sin element, but it is one of the important elements on the table, and by seeing it, the concept of Nowruz or New Year is associated in the mind. This is due to the fact that this goldfish is only seen on the streets during the Nowruz eve. Designers use this element in their artwork as it has a cheerful color and its shape is recognizable. The presence of goldfish with its beautiful color makes it vibrant in the frame and attracts the audience. Of course, the use of red color is limited to the subtle spring season.

Other commonly used techniques in the poster of Nowruz are the use of rhythm and typography. Designers use rhythm to create diversity in the frame which is one of the important features of the festival. Typography which is usually written in the Nastaliq style of calligraphy gives identity to the artwork and stimulates the audience's emotion. An overview of several posters of Nowruz in terms of graphic design is illustrated in Fig 1 and 2.

3.1. Analyzing Poster Contents

The poster is designed with the theme of Nowruz, and the content and concept of the artwork are presented by implementing various methods. Initially, the designer uses a neutral color in the background and lively colors in the foreground that remind us of the passing away of winter and revival of nature. The green color, in addition to enhancing vitality, is one of the main colors of Nowruz which is meaningful in the work of art. The designer, by using ancient Iranian motifs and old spaces in the artwork, refers to the ancient nature of the festival and depicts the image in the form of a carpet. The Haft Sin table is a depiction of Nowruz and states the theme of artwork. Using the Haft Sin in the background with faded colors is an intelligent way to show the ancient and traditional nature.

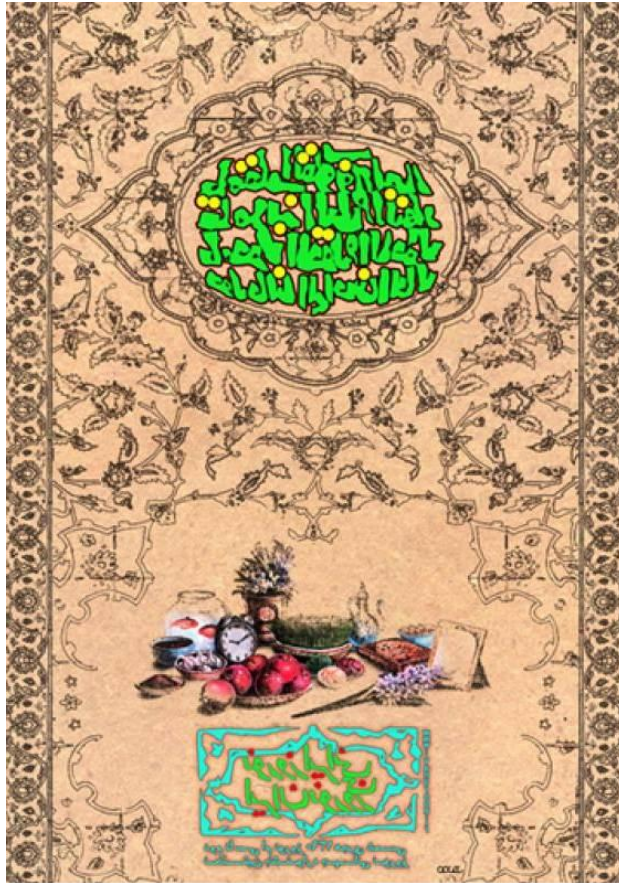


Fig 1 Nowruz festival composition poster

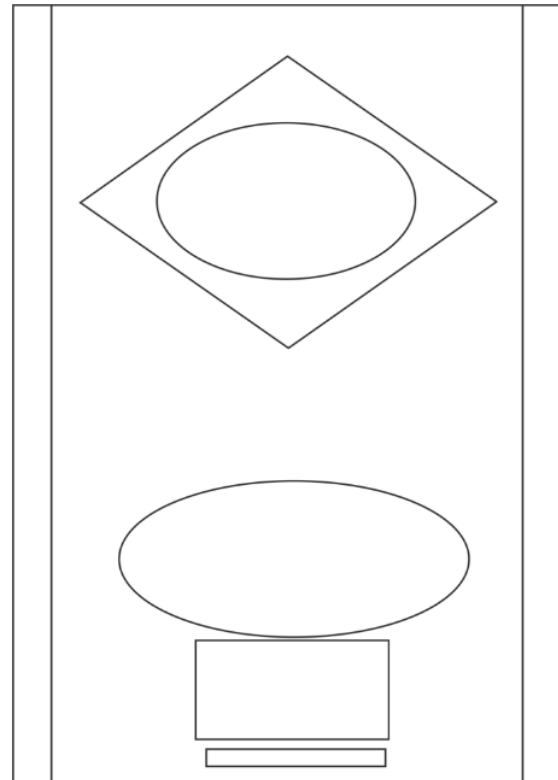


Fig 2 Nowruz festival composition poster

3.2. Symbol

As previously mentioned, the artwork has been designed with the theme of Nowruz. This is the most celebrated festival of ancient Iran with many symbols. The designer in the artwork exhibits the Haft Sin table that includes all the symbols of this festival. In this manner, the designer directly refers to the theme and leaves no doubt in the mind of the audience. In addition, using the green color for the text above the image has the highest visual energy, indirectly illustrating Nowruz. In addition to the direct use of Nowruz symbols, the designer uses symbolic colors for the design.

Table 1 Describing the Nowruz festival poster components

Color	Texture	Graphical technique	Rhythm	Form	Structure	Symbol
Neutral and lively color contrast	Graphite paper	Creating old space	Uniform and alternate	Horizontal	Symmetrical	Haft Sin

4. Analysis of the Mehregan Festival Poster

Mehregan is a festival related to Fereydoun and the revolution against Zahak's cruelty. This festival is one of the greatest Iranian rituals which is unfortunately being forgotten, and it is only known by a few communities. That is why poster and artwork is limited in this area. Since the festival has been forgotten, its customs are not familiar to people and there are no special symbols. The most important theme which is left is freedom, and the symbol of this festival is the cypress tree (Fig 3 and 4).

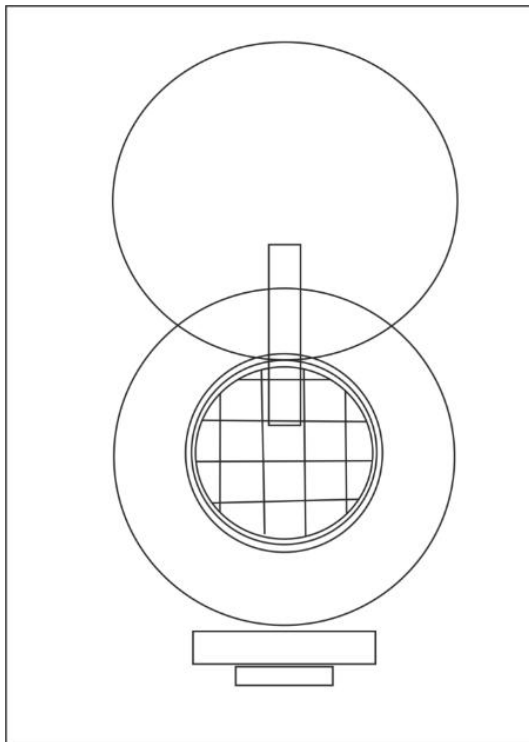


Fig 3 Visual elements composition



Fig 4 Mehregan festival poster

4.1. Analyzing Poster Contents

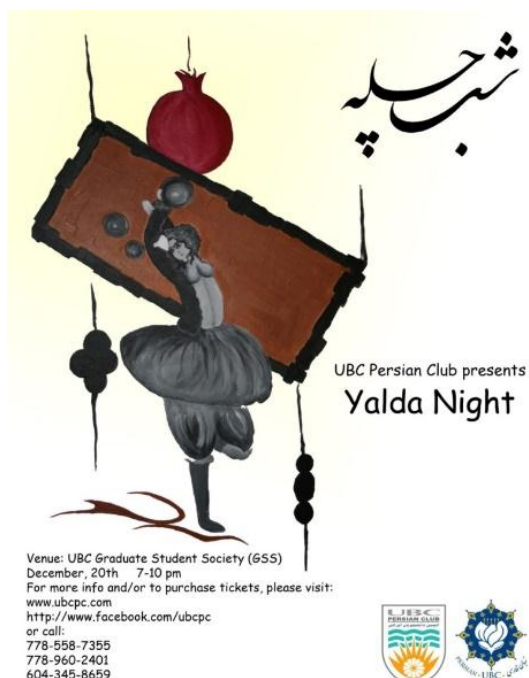
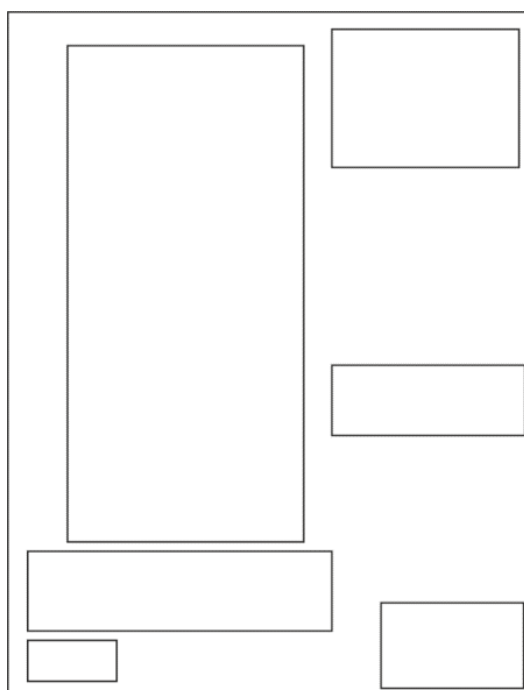
This work of art was designed with the theme of Mehregan festival and the celebration is for resistance and freedom. The designer has used a cypress tree which is the symbol of freedom as its most important visual element. This tree begins from the center of the frame and continues upward. It envelops within itself the word of *Mehregan* and the youth's head who are the survivors of this day. The cypress tree, as the most powerful element, covers all the elements of the poster and the circular shape refers to the earth. The designer uses the cypress tree which has been the symbol of freedom in his portray and communicates with the audience using symbols of this festival.

Table 2 Describing the Mehregan festival poster components

Color	Texture	Graphical technique	Rhythm	Form	Structure	Symbol
Color with less brightness	Drawing texture	Manual	Alternate and revolutionary	Circular	Symmetrical	Cypress tree

5. Analysis of the Yalda Poster

One of the famous festivals of the ancient Iranians is the Yalda which is held on the first night of winter. Fortunately, this festival is still taking place and it is celebrated in Iran like Nowruz. The tradition of this celebration is to get together and eat fruits and nuts. This tradition has become popular among people, and fruits such as pomegranate and watermelon have become the symbol of this night.

**Fig 5** Poster illustration of the Yalda Festival**Fig 6** Graphical presentation

5.1. Analyzing Poster Contents

This work of art was designed with the theme of Yalda night. In Iranian mythology, this night is known as the rebirth of sun, which is reborn after the longest night of the year. The yellow color in the background reflects this belief. In the foreground of the picture, one sees a woman in local dress with a traditional pendant. Although the designer has used good elements and portrayed them beautifully, there is no specific relationship between the elements and each has to be defined separately. The pomegranate image above the woman's image is a symbol of this night, which the designer has used to connect the audience with the subject. The designer has directly used the

symbol related to the celebration to design the poster. Pomegranate is a fruit that is eaten at Yalda night as a tradition, and the designer by drawing the pomegranate in the poster has expressed such a theme.

Table 3 Describing the Yalda festival poster components

Color	Texture	Graphical technique	Rhythm	Form	Structure	Symbol
Grey and neutral color	Drawing texture	Manual	-	Rectangle and Circular	Asymmetrical	Pomegranate

6. Analysis of the Sadeh Festival

The Sadeh festival is an Iranian celebration that has been eliminated and forgotten to a great extent from the rituals and celebrations. The most important symbol of this festival is fire. Since the Sadeh festival has been almost forgotten and many people have not even heard its name, limited poster designs exist thereof. Nevertheless, with the help of the available studies done on the poster, it can be understood that the elements and methods used are similar to other ancient festivals. The designer has used happy colors to design the artwork, and a lot of yellow and red colors are used to depict the fire festival. In this work of art, the designer has used a rhythm to create motion and dynamism in the image frame. A few of the posters are studied so far.



Fig 7 Sadeh festival poster

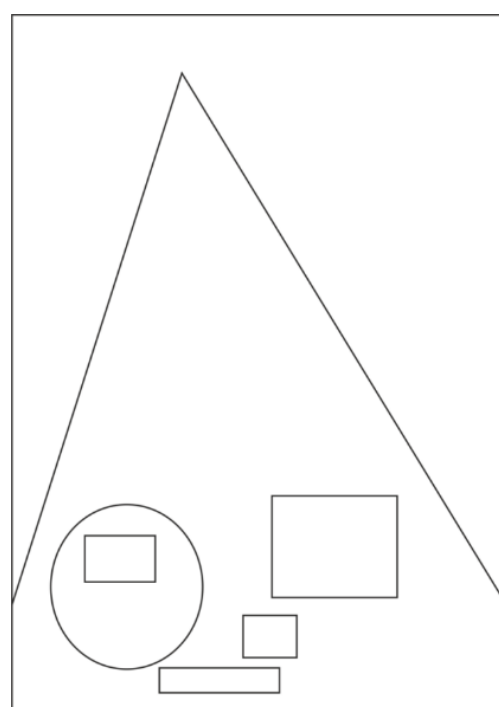


Fig 8 Analysis of the visual elements composition

6.1. Analyzing Poster Contents

There is not much information about the Sedah festival and the philosophy of the celebration, but what is clear is the ceremony of burning fire in this festival. The designer portrays much of the space with fire and emphasizes the importance of this element in this festival. The use of Nastaliq script gives beauty and identity to the work of art.

Table 4 Describing the Sadeh festival poster components

Color	Texture	Graphical technique	Rhythm	Form	Structure	Symbol
Warm and cool	Drawing texture	Manual printing	Evolutionary	Triangle	Symmetrical	Fire

7. Analysis of the Chaharshanbe Soori

Chaharshanbe Soori is one of the well-known festivals in Iran, which has been popular among people till date. There are many traditions and fictions in relation to it, but the story, which is most acceptable by the scholars, is related to Siavash and his walk through the fire to prove his innocence. This ceremony which is still popular in Iran is associated with open fire and people's jumping over the fire. Therefore, the fire in this festival is considered as the main element and symbol that the artist portrays.

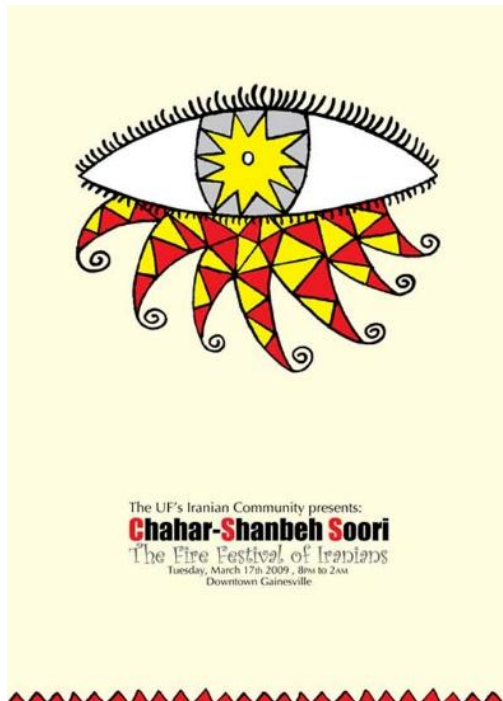


Fig 9 Chaharshanbe Soori Poster

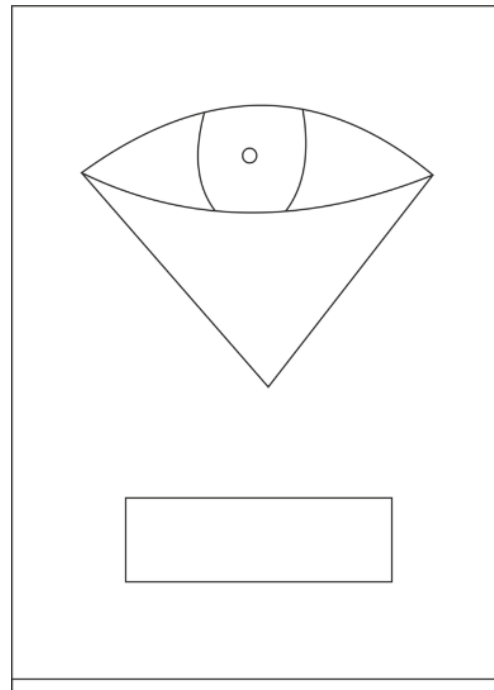


Fig 10 Analysis of the visual elements composition

7.1. Analyzing Poster Contents

The poster that has been designed on the occasion of Chaharshanbe Soori does not contain any element or symbol that emphasizes this festival. The role of the eye which can be described as the only element of the poster is not any depiction of the Chaharshanbe Soori celebration, and more resembles a circus clown. Perhaps, this image is more appropriate for a poster with the theme of a circus or magic festival. The colors yellow and red are inspired by fire. The designer has used these colors to convey his concept, but the small space occupied by these colors does not give a warm and energetic feeling. The inside pupil of the eye is like a star that is yellow in color; it can be said that it represents a person who looks at the fire, and the designer portrays the reflection of the fire brightness in the eye of the audience. This form can be mentioned as the designer's most accomplishing depiction of the Chaharshanbe Soori. This artwork however cannot be regarded as a successful work of art in communicating with the audience. Although this artwork was structurally and aesthetically satisfactory, it does not convey the message and the audience cannot understand the message without reading the text.

Table 5 Describing the Chaharshanbe Soori festival poster components

Color	Texture	Graphical technique	Rhythm	Form	Structure	Symbol
Warm	-	-	Uniform and alternate	Triangle	Symmetrical	Warm color

8. Conclusion

By reviewing the posters related to the five important ancient Iranian festivals, we found that the artists have used more of colors and rhythms to convey and express their concepts. In posters related to festivals (i.e. Eids) and celebrations, the artists have used various visual techniques to illustrate the concept of motion in the frame. Each designer takes into consideration this principle according to his style of work.

The most important and influential element in the artworks related to ancient festivals is color. Since most Iranian festivals are associated with fire, warm colors are the most applicable colors in these works. The designers convey the concept of fire to the audience by putting together yellow, red and orange and create a warm atmosphere. In the works where the designers have used different aspects of colors such as symbols, the artwork is more successful and has conveyed a better communication with the audience. Creating a happy and lively atmosphere by using pure colors and organizing the correct color are very effective for the success of the artwork.

Rhythm is an important factor for inducing motion and dynamism, and the main indicator of many festivals. Iranian designers have used rhythm in their works for various purposes in various ways. In works where the designer did not induce the concept of motion with different rhythms, the design had more diversity. In most of the works studied, the designer has created an element of original design via a rhythmic repetition, resulting in the dynamic effect within the artwork. One of the usual methods for using rhythm in these years is the repetition of the text known as typography. Designers have benefited from typography, especially by using the Nastaliq script for identification of their works, and have increased the aesthetics of their artwork. In addition to its beauty, the Nastaliq script shows the sense of motion due to its stretched shape. Most of the works studied have a symmetrical composition and the designer uses this method to keep balance in the artwork. In the

artworks, however, the designers have implemented equilibrium in the frame with the use of visual energy, and hence the artwork is more successful and has more image variations.

Designers have increased the diversity and dynamism in the space of the frame by using different textures in their work. One of the most commonly used textures is the hand-printing technique which has a special effect on the artwork. Textures are used in different ways to convey different concepts and have significant impacts on the artwork. By organizing different elements together, different textures are created which have a high visual energy. Designers have used textures as a method to diversify the work space and convey certain concepts and meanings.

In the analysis of the artworks related to the festivals, most of them have an original form in the main structure and a detailed composition form. Using the main form in the frame, the designers have given coherence to design, and using composition to form has given dynamism to the work of art. For success in the composition, the designers have used correct forms so that the space of the frame can be verified from the aesthetic point of view. The artworks in which the designers have used dynamic and energetic forms in their composition to convey the festival message were more successful.

Different graphic techniques allow designers to differentiate their design and artwork from those of the others and create their own style. Therefore, the work of art is more effective and better in inducing the poster concept. However, unfortunately in most of the artworks studied, the designers have made limited use of graphic software and have not used a unique technique in their work. The successful technique used in these artworks is the integration of a hand printing method with a computer method.

In many artworks, the designers have directly used symbols related to festivals, and in few cases they have used the symbolic aspect of color to describe the subject of the artwork. The use of symbols makes a quick contact of the audience with the subject, resulting in more impacts. In most artworks under analysis, the designers have used symbols in a correct way, have not wasted them in organizing the work space and have not decorated the symbols.

1. Posters with colors for conveying the meaning and concept of the festival were more successful and had a better communication with the audience.
2. Use of warm colors activates the space and creates a better perception of the subject and message of the poster for the audience.
3. An important element in poster related to ancient festivals is the use of rhythm.
4. Use of the symbolic aspect of color in posters related to Nowruz and Chaharshanbe Soori has been effective.
5. Designers have used typography as a successful method for artwork and for quicker communication with the audience.
6. For creating variety in the image, the designers have used hand-printing techniques.
7. Most of the ancient festival posters have a vibrant and dynamic atmosphere.
8. Posters with a high visual energy form can convey the message quicker to the audience.
9. Color is an important factor in communicating with the audience.

Based on the results of this research, it has been proved that what exists in ancient Iranian culture has the potentialities in terms of semiotics and can be used in various cultural fields. It is suggested that such an application be considered in cases such as children's book illustrations and dynamism.

Table 6 Symbols illustrating the Iranian festivals

	Plant symbol	Animal symbol	Natural symbol	Thing
Nowruz festival Symbol: Sabze, goldfish, apple, Samanu, Somagh, Senjed, Vinegar, water and mirror				
Yalda festival Symbol: Pomegranate and watermelon				
Mehregan Festival Cypress tree (concept of freedom)				
Sadeh Festival Symbol: Fire				
Chaharshanbe Soori Symbol: Fire				

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